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Providing food to those who need it

By Michel Nolan
Staff Writer

Nearly half a million hungry people. Not a statistic from a Third World country, but the number of people in San Bernardino County who live on the edge of hunger, according to a study released by UCLA.

Hard to imagine during this festive time of year, says Herman Pena, manager of the Community Action Partnership Food Bank of San Bernardino County.

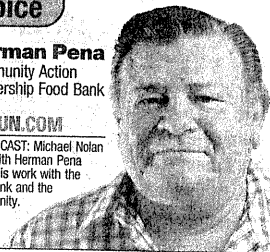
"People do a lot of fun
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Herman Pena
Community Action
Partnership Food Bank

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PODCAST: Michael Nolan
talks with Herman Pena
about his work with the
food bank and the
community.



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things during the holidays — that's nice, but we're always here. Even with as many people as we serve, we're just making a little dent in the problem," Pena says.

According to the study conducted by UCLA and published by the California Food Policy Advocates in 2003, there are at least 488,000 people in the county who need food assistance at some time during the month, Pena notes.

The Food Bank, based in San Bernardino, serves about 20,000 households every month.

"The program is not designed to meet all of the nutritional needs of the family. It's only a supplemental program, but it helps," Pena says.

"It helps people who are not earning a lot of money but are employed. It helps to stretch people's meager food budgets."

From his position feeding the county's hungry residents, Pena offers this perspective:

Question: How does the Food Bank work?

Answer: The Food Bank serves as a clearinghouse. We store the food and allocate it to the sites according to how many they serve.

Back in 1984, the Food Bank started when a lot of people were coming in asking for food assistance. We knew we had to do something. We have several programs that address hunger. The U.S. Department of Agriculture commodities-distribution program has distribution sites throughout the county — 98 sites where we give out food. In order for an agency to become a member of the net-

work, they have to be a non-profit, 501 3(c) agency.

The Salvage Program has an additional 52 sites. They give out food that comes from the private sector — Stater Bros., Vons, Albertsons, private individuals.

Q: As the population of the county increases, is the number of hungry increasing proportionately?

A: I think it's proportionate. I've been with the Food Bank 16 years, and I've kept track of population growth. The need has been proportionate with population growth. Part of what we do is assess the need.

Q: About how many people do you serve?

A: We serve about 20,000 households a month. We are about the fourth-largest food bank in the state.

We also have 21 soup kitchens scattered throughout the

county, averaging about 45,000 meals per month. These are meals served at congregate sites on a regular basis. There is no charge — no criteria at the soup kitchens. If you're hungry, have a seat, they'll serve you.

We serve a lot of homeless people, people who are underemployed or people who are unemployed. We touch a lot of lives in the period of a month.

Q: What kind of volume are we talking about when it comes to stores of food?

A: Tractor-trailers full of food, stacked on pallets 18 feet high in the 8,500-square-foot warehouse. If you're talking about rice, we distribute about 40,000 pounds of rice per month. To each family, we give about 20-21 pounds of food each month. This year, we're giving out more than 12,000 Christmas baskets,

which weigh 19 pounds per basket. We normally give out anywhere between 250,000 to 300,000 pounds of food per month.

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In January, the Food Bank will move from its present site on Drake Drive in San Bernardino to a new 30,000-square-foot warehouse on Tippecanoe Avenue in San Bernardino, Pena says.

He says the agency is looking forward to the move, which will give it more than three times its current space.

For more information about the Food Bank, call (909) 386-5011.

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